

## INVESTIGATION OF PAST SHOES BY VAHNI CAPILDEO

### INSIDE THE GATEWAY: 1970S RED CLOGS WITH SIDE BUCKLE

The forever shoe, which points homewards, belongs to my mother. When our house was being built, she stepped onto the driveway while the tarmac was still wet, still setting. Ever since that step, the driveway, which slants upwards, bears an imprint of her 1971 footwear. Her footprint says, *Climb! Come with me*. Whoever steps into that impression becomes, for a moment, the leggy wearer of a fire-red clog with a piratical silver buckle on the side.

### OUTSIDE THE TEMPLE: GOLD AND SILVER SANDALS

The sandals which will make a female of me belong to many women. The front of the temple entrance hides itself behind shoe-racks. Visitors enter barefooted, leaving behind the dung, dried frogs, spilled petrol and ketchup traces of the streets. Hundreds of pairs of gold and silver sandals wait here for the women who will re-emerge from the vigil with the taste of basil leaf and sugar in their deep-breathing mouths and carpet fibres between their toes. The sandals, gold and silver, seem all alike. How can the women tell them apart? They do tell them apart. It is as if each pair sings an intimate mantra to its owner, audible only to her. One day I too shall return to expectant slippers that stack up like the moon and the stars outside a marble building; one day I shall not have to wear child's shoes.

### SUNDAY BEFORE SCHOOL: WHITE SNEAKERS

Seven years of these shoes are a chemical memory. The Convent ruled that pupils' shoes must be white: absolutely white. Who can imagine a 1980s shoe that was absolutely white, without any logo, with no swoosh, not a single slogan? Sunday evenings, before the school week, I crouched down on the pink bathroom tiles and painted my shoes into the absolute of whiteness; like the Alice in Wonderland gardeners repainting roses. This task was performed with a toothbrush and with special paste that annihilated so many design features. Purity was attained by the application of a whitener that stank of scientific polysyllables. Convent-girl identity. Tabula rasa. Toxicity and intoxication: with good intentions, getting high on paste.

### BAD MARRIAGE SHOES: SILVER BALLET SLIPPERS

When I met my ex, I was already committed to heels: black ankle boots with four-inch stacks for walking through snow; French cream curved suède stilettos for scaling fire-escape ladders on to rooftops to admire the winter sky; even after I left him, scarlet satin bedroom-only spiky mules to amuse myself. Early on, my ex said that the way women walk in heels looks ugly. And my nails made unnatural social appearances: emerald lacquer; cobalt; incarnadine. Sign of a bad marriage: I began to wear flats. The penitential mermaid shoes, worn once and once only, were a Gabor creation: distressed silver ballet slippers with netted and criss-cross side details which would make the material seem to swish with the changes of light on feet that go walking. Cool as moonlight on a tourist coastline. But the inner stitching hooked the softness of my skin, which has always been too soft; but I could not turn back, for we had tickets to an evening of Mozart; but the paper tissues that I stuffed into my shoes failed to act as a protective lining. Paper tissue snow-flecks teardropped with crimson blood created a trail behind me as I ascended the many tiers of the wedding-cake concert hall.

### BAREFOOT: PEARL PINK POLISH

Sitting next to someone can make my feet curl: shy, self-destructive and oyster-like, they want to shuck their cases, to present themselves, little undersea pinks; their skin still is too soft, their toes still too long, their ankles still too slender, for a modern fit. But he is not modern; he sits like stone, and my bare feet are cool, they will not have to bleed.